



Chris Danou's Capitol Report

Legislation Will Improve Railroad Safety in Wisconsin

Railroads are an essential part of our economy as they transport and deliver essential goods and products. While most railroad operations happen every day in a safe and efficient manner, there are still times in which a train derails that leads to negative consequences and impacts in a local community.

Just within the last two weeks, Wisconsin has seen two train derailments in Alma and Watertown that have seriously impacted communities and required major cleanup efforts. I was in Alma last week and I want to give credit to all the officials from the Buffalo County Sheriff's Department, Buffalo County Emergency Management, Alma Fire Department, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, and all other agencies who have responded and for their efforts in the cleanup process. We really are fortunate to have such dedicated people working to alleviate this unfortunate situation.

Agencies and officials from all levels of government are involved in the cleanup, but regulation for our railroad system is done at the federal level. Even though the railroad system is regulated by the federal government, my colleagues and I feel there are things we can do at the state level to improve the safety of the track system, advance the ability of our communities to respond in the case of a derailment, and protect the safety citizens of Wisconsin. Last week, my colleagues and I introduced the Wisconsin Rail Safety and Protection Act in an effort to address important issues related to rail safety.

The bill focuses on things we can improve here in Wisconsin and will be helpful to communities in case of future derailments. Specifically, the bill provides for more state rail track inspectors, requires railroad companies to submit prevention and response plans to the state, provides training for local emergency first responders along railroad routes and provides guidelines for coordination and response timelines in the event of a derailment. The bill also requires the Office of the Commissioner of Railroads to submit a report to the legislature on emergency preparedness, assessment of training needs for first responders statewide, inventory of both public and private resources available in the event of a derailment or discharge, and recommendations to the legislature to improve preparedness and safety of our citizens. With these efforts, there will be improved and increased communication for preparation and response between local communities, state regulation and railroad companies.

This bill is necessary and timely, and I hope that the Republican majority and the Governor are willing to work with Democrats to see the Wisconsin Rail Safety and Protection Act become law. In light of recent events, it's become even clearer that more needs to be done to protect the rail system and communities across Wisconsin. It's our job as lawmakers to respond and make necessary changes and improvements in the interest of public safety. That's exactly what this bill does, and I hope it receives significant bipartisan support to increase its chances of becoming law. After all, train derailments can happen anywhere there are train tracks and it impacts everyone in a community, no matter their political leanings or affiliation.

